Mary Queen of Nowhere: History, Drama and the Paradox of Intermedial Identity in the Rhetoric of *Mary: Queen of Scots*

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Abstract
Josie Rourke's 2018 *Mary Queen of Scots* was met with mixed reviews. Critics excoriated its air-headed approach to historical detail and its penchant for Instagram-style eye-candy. Others praised its leads' theatrical talents and the gripping twists of its feminist-infused agenda. In ways that are arguably more intense than other similar adaptations, *Mary Queen of Scots* seems uneasily aware of the rift between its own setup as drama and the history it endeavours to revisit. The purpose of this paper is to address the rhetorical and theatrical stylistics of this unavoidable rift by applying Kenneth Burke's reflections on the rhetorical paradoxes of history and drama. Burke's Dramatistic approach also sheds light, I believe, on another feature that, given their presentist focus on topicality, appraisals of this biopic seem largely to neglect: the ever-puzzling entanglements between sexual, national, and religious identity.

Key-words: intermediality, Mary Queen of Scots, Burke, screenplay, rhetoric, identity politics.

It was late August 1586 when Francis Walsingham's men searched Queen Mary's private rooms at the manor house of Chartley, in Staffordshire, where she was held captive. Mary's numerous papers, her letters, drafts, minutes, memos, and notebooks were seized. Among them were also the keys and tables of nearly 60 ciphers, which Mary's secretaries had used to encode her secret correspondence with the outside. This was, in fact, but the last act in a protracted intelligence operation on the part of Walsingham and Cecil to get hold of incriminating evidence against her. Their spies had long intercepted all the exchanges between the Queen and her supporters: Thomas Phelippes, Walsingham's brilliant cryptographer and forger, had managed to crack Mary's cipher and when, on July 17th, Mary had sent a reply to Anthony Babington

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expressing a veiled approval to the assassination of Elizabeth, Phelippes had copied the letter, drawn a gallows on the envelope and added a forged postscript that asked Babington for the names of the "six gentlemen" who must be "set to work" to free Mary and "dispatch the usurping Competitor"[1]. Mary's fate was sealed. Cecil and Walsingham had gathered enough evidence to counter Elizabeth's dithering over a death sentence, and Mary was beheaded at Fotheringhay Castle on 1 February 1587. Among her last words, she is reported to have uttered: "tell my friends that I die a true woman to my religion, and like a true Scottish woman and a true French woman" (Guy 2004: 3).

The theatrical circumstances of Mary Stuart's execution at Fotheringhay provide an unmissable prompt to Josie Rourke's 2018 historical drama *Mary Queen of Scots*[2], loosely based on John Guy's award-winning biography, *My Heart is My Own* (2004), via a polished screenplay by Beau Willimon, creator and chief writer of the famed Netflix political drama *House of Cards*.

What is immediately striking about this latest biopic on Mary Stuart[3] is that Willimon's screenplay rather blithely plunders the layered historical reconstruction given by Guy to uphold Rourke's pointed directorial take on the subject. No plots or secret exchanges involving Mary are ever mentioned in the film, nor is much space given to the ample anecdotal evidence over the many facets of Mary's

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[1] The whole affair was to become known as the Babington Plot. See *The National Archives of the UK* (TNA): SP 12/193/54 and SP 53/18/55 http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/spies/ciphers/mary/ma2.htm, last accessed on October 7, 2019.

[2] The film premiered at the *American Film Institute Fest* in November 2018 and was released in theatres in the US and the UK between December 2018 and January 2019. It garnered three nominations at the *British Academy Films Award* and a nomination a *Best Achievement in Makeup and Hairstyling* at the *91st Academy Awards*. Margot Robbie, who played Elizabeth I in the film, also received a BAFTA nomination for *Best Supporting Actress*. The sole feature that won the film undivided acclaim and two awards has to do with period make-up and hairstyling (*Hollywood Film Awards*, 2018, winner; *Hollywood Makeup Artist and Hair Stylist Guild Awards*, 2019, winner). Henceforth abbreviated to *MQS* to refer both to the screenplay and the film.

[3] *Mary Queen of Scots,* Dir. Josie Rourke. Focus Features, USA, 2018. A very different portrayal of Mary's turbulent life is given in *Mary Queen of Scots*, Dir. Thomas Imbach. Okofilm, Switzerland, 2013. See also *Mary, Queen of Scots,* Dir. Charles Jarrott. Universal Pictures, USA, 1971.

education, of her religious and political commitments, all aspects that Guy's biography compellingly brings forth. That a screenplay should sacrifice or condense historical detail for the sake of cinematic effect is, of course, inevitable. Nonetheless, I believe *MQS* provides a fascinating case-study for shedding due light on the condensations and reductions of history that the intermediality of screenplays, and intermediality at large, entail. This is what I intend to do here by following cues laid down by rhetorician Kenneth Burke, whose eclectic work continues to provide insights into the meanderings and the pitfalls of language across media. In the process, I would also like to reflect on the paradoxical inclusions and exclusions that the pesky notion of "intermediality" poses to our troubled cultural landscape. Irina Rajewsky (2005) reflected on the problematic scope of multiple media-related phenomena that fall rather indiscriminately under the umbrella term of "intermediality". I follow her useful breakdown of intermediality into three broad definitions to do with 1) media transposition in the form of adaptations; 2) media combination, as in multimedia and mixed media content; and 3) intertextuality (2005: 51). My analysis of MQS adopts the transmedial perspective of definition number 1 (*intermediality as media transposition*) but also touches upon the combinatorial implications of novel and screenplay (which would go under definition 2). I also keep an eye on modes of intermedial adaptation as investigated by Joy Sisley (2007: especially p. 30) and discussed by Maddalena Pennacchia and Márta Minier (2014) with specific reference to biopics. Finally, to think of intermediality in MQS as an adaptation-based process means to consider at least tangentially the ever-expanding realm of studies on history itself as a form of adaptation, especially with regard to film. To use Rosenstone's (2012: XI) words, it means to interrogate "the history film's rule of engagement with the past". Influential work by Hayden White insisted on "the idea of history as a historical cultural discourse constituted by historians as much as [...] reconstructed from the sources available about the past" (1978: IX). Further research in this direction led him to introduce the notion of *historiophoty*, as the "representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse" (1988: 1193), a concept that intermedial studies seem to have embraced. In the wake of White's work, Frank Ankersmit (2012: 9) stressed the effectiveness of seeing the "history film as part of a separate

realm of representation and discourse, one not meant to provide literal truths about the past […] but metaphoric truths which work, to a large degree, as a kind of commentary on, and challenge to, traditional historical discourse". Similar concerns underlie Dafne Ersin Tutan's recent essay on history as adaptation, which sheds light on the "discrepancy between how history is conceived and how it is perceived" by looking at the divergent receptions of Showtime's TV hit *The Tudors* (2007) by British and Turkish audiences (2017: 625). Despite the wealth of useful suggestions provided by these and other studies, it is my contention that a reflection of history in the terms systematically addressed by Rosenstone, White, Ankersmit, and Leitch was to an impressive extent anticipated by the trail-blazing inquiry of Kenneth Burke on the rhetoric of history, on the notion of *history* as *story* (dramatised storytelling). It is no chance that Leitch himself, editor of the *Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, should feel inclined to evoke Burke twice in his introduction (Leitch 2017: 9, 18). It is therefore to Burke's work that this paper mostly turns for inspiration[4].

1. Reductions

Screenwriter Beau Willimon was asked about the writing of *MQS* soon after the film's initial limited release in Los Angeles. In an interview published at the time, he mentioned his long discussions on the screenplay with director Josie Rourke, the advice of writer John Guy and the challenges he faced revisiting a well-known story with a new focus, which was to be the human dynamic between two women: Mary and Elizabeth (Morales 2018). As adaptations demand, Guy's 500-odd page account had to be winnowed down to the 120-page size of a manageable screenplay via focused acts of selection and condensation. It is this aspect which I think deserves to be explored more closely if we are to come to terms with the workings (and the possible strictures) of intermediality. We should

[4] I am thinking in particular of Burke's sustained engagement with historiographical issues in *Attitudes Toward History* (1937). Burke's influence on "postmodern" views of history would call for a full discussion that falls beyond the scope of this paper. For a general sense of Burke's enduring reflections on the subject see Wess (1996) and Lentricchia (1982).

start by recalling William Goldman's tell-tale metaphor about screenwriting as "hack[ing] away at the morass of material" and "throwing away" a good portion of the book (Goldman 1985: 217), for screenwriting ultimately means cutting down, curtailing, and excluding on the basis of selection criteria that often conflict. Also, with clarity and force unparalleled, Goldman has teased out the many external factors that bear upon scriptwriting in a film's production: in the phase prior to shooting, during shooting and even in post-production. What results is a composite aggregate which defies the naive notion of an independent screenwriter or an independent screenplay to highlight instead the ceaseless (and often aggravating) interventions of the director, head picture editor, producer(s), star(s), cinematographer and production designer (to name only the most prominent agents). The examples Goldman gives from his own long-term Hollywood experience highlight what we could call the "affective" dimensions of adaptation: the subtle, often tangential but definite nudging (social, financial, interpersonal) that orients the screenwriter's selection and deployment of material.

At a more abstract level, the progressive reductions in scope that intermedial adaptations require are an extension of the reductions that historiography itself of necessity imposes on the experiential continuum of history. An informal chart of the process could go like this:

LIVED EXPERIENCE → HISTORICAL RECORDS → HISTORICAL DRAMA or BIOGRAPHIES → SCREENPLAY → STORYBOARD → BIOPIC → SPINOFFS/TIE-INS (novelisations)

History as time-bound experience is transposed into historical records by disparate agents in the form of acts, annals, letters, chronicles, all documents a historian weaves into the dramatic form of historical biography. A screenwriter taps the historian's fictive world to produce a further abridgement of events in the form of a screenplay, itself an intermedial form, as Jack Boozer (2008) convincingly reminds us[5]. The screenplay, altered by the multiple

[5] Boozer discusses the "fragile status of authorship in the shifting landscape of adaptation theory" (2008: 1) with a specific focus on screenplays as intermedial or

agents of influence involved in cinematic production, quite possibly via the unacknowledged hand of script doctors, often finds a further makeshift form in a storyboard, to emerge eventually in the relatively self-contained audio-visual outcome of the film itself. Nor does the process stop at this stage. "Tie-in products" is a handy umbrella term for the many intermedial forms that may ensue (novelisations, spinoffs, making-ofs, featurettes, re-releases, videogames, podcasts, merchandising, among others). *MQS* follows this sequence quite closely. John Guy, history fellow at Clare College Cambridge, contributes a solid, if at times skewed, account of Mary's life based on fresh archival evidence and an attentive rereading of established records, which were hailed as instances of "first-class scholarship and first-class storytelling" (Adamson 2004). Beau Willimon (apparently channelling quite a bit of Josie Rourke in the process) distilled Guy's 600-page work into a 120-page screenplay, of which we also have storyboards. And the film was followed by a tie-in re-release of Guy's 2004 bestseller, with the new, aggressively cinematic subtitle "two queens, one future" replacing Guy's lyricised quotation "My heart is my own" (Fourth Estate – Film tie-in edition, 2018). One way of coming to terms with the gradual compression of detail that, we have seen, leads intermedially to the biopic is to look at it via the rhetorical framework Burke uses to illuminate the tangle of language, and it is to this framework I now turn for insight into the treacherous modes of intermediality. The ambitious scope of Burke's overall theory is of no concern here: the goal is to use his rhetorical analysis of human motivation as conveyed by language to reflect on screenwriting.

Burke devotes a whole section of his *Grammar of Motives* (1945) to a wide-ranging discussion of the "Scope and Reduction" of language people use to describe reality or the motives of their actions. His initial assessment of what is involved deserves to be quoted in full:

> Men seek for vocabularies that will be faithful reflections of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are selections of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a deflection

transmedial forms that modern directors rely on for "their interpretation of the literary property and its presentation" (p. 4).

of reality. Insofar as the vocabulary meets the needs of reflection, we can say that it has the necessary scope. In its selectivity, it is a reduction. Its scope and reduction become a deflection when the given terminology, or calculus, is not suited to the subject matter which it is designed to calculate. (Burke 1945: 59)

Reflection, selection, deflection: these are three basic operations any mediation of reality entails. Thus, we should always be on the alert, Burke warns, for anecdotes or stories that are put forward as truthful representations of a given action or juncture, for often such storytelling, when not intentionally misleading, falls gravely short of the complex motivational or historical dynamics it purports to convey. Reducing motivation to one "essential" motive, say "survival instinct", "love of power" or "the market" or "sex" and to see all other motivations as derivative is for Burke a flagrant misrepresentation of reality. A careful reading of events calls instead for what Burke names a "representative anecdote", that is an introductory form "sufficiently demarcated in character to make analysis possible, yet sufficiently complex in character to prevent the use of too few terms in one's description" (p. 324).

I believe Burke's remarks can shed useful light on intermedial phenomena, especially as seen in the case of *MQS*. Even though it suggests "a new aesthetic space that subverts the meta-narrative of older artistic forms such as literature, photography and painting" (Sisley 2007: 30), a hazy, medial "in-between" the old and the new that rejects fixity in favour of flux, I think intermediality does commend to our attention new sets of representational anecdotes, new stories whose modes and styles may be intentionally provisional and audio-visual but whose rhetorical focus is undoubtedly prescriptive. The kind of "intermedial elasticity" endorsed by many cannot escape the rhetorical pitfalls Burke identified. For the synthetic representations of "strips of reality", to use Appadurai's image (1996), that the current mediascape favours ultimately partake of the same rhetorical appeal and of the same symbolic pull of dramatisation at large. Intermedial space is still a dramatised space (in the Burkean sense of the word)[6]: a stage or a scene, albeit self-consciously or

[6] In Burke's theory of language, dramatisation occurs at all levels of human communication (including historical accounts): it is an unavoidable feature of

deliberately ephemeral, global and/or local, where representation takes place. We will address some of the implications of this later. For now, it is enough to restate the truism that an analysis of *MQS* as a screenplay and a film is the analysis of a form of symbolic representation, the dramatised reconstruction of a life (the writing of a life) whose storytelling tactics to some extent differ from those of a full-length biography but whose rhetorical appeal presents us with the same basic conundrum identified by Burke. If it is true, as he proposes, that humans are best understood as symbol-using and abusing animals (Burke 1950: 192), it makes sense to approach screenplays as yet another instance of symbolic manipulation. And because screenplays are by definition a quintessential form of symbolic reduction (in the case of a biopic, select scenes arranged in a storyline that is supposed to capture at least some of the historical vicissitudes of an actual life), it also makes sense to take a closer look at the "representative anecdotes" they put on stage, to reflect on the kind of cultural assumptions they serve and the range of ideological presumptions they encourage. This is what we are going to do next.

2. Representations

In its revised October 2017 form, Beau Willimon's screenplay for *MQS* covers 118 pages of script, which only touch upon the second half of John Guy's lengthy biography, starting with Mary's return to Scotland after her formative years in France. Willimon was aware of the challenges involved in writing historical drama, namely the hard task of doing extensive research which then needed to be broken

language itself by no means limited to creative fiction or theatrical performance. Burke's dramatistic view of language blurs sharp distinction between genres, such as the one called for in biographical studies between fictionalised biography/historical fiction biography, for instance Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009) and historical non-fiction (Guy's *Mary Queen of Scots*). Genre-bender writer Geoff Dyer has some intriguing thoughts on the blurring between fiction and nonfiction in current writing. See https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/06/based-on-a-true-story--geoff-dyer-fine-line-between-fact-and-fiction-nonfiction, last accessed on January 31, 2020. One should also perhaps consider the extent to which clear generic markers partake of a market-driven and data-driven need for cataloguing and distributing products efficiently.

down to fit the screen. He talked about the issue at some length in an exclusive interview with *Blackfilm magazine* in 2018. There he also mentioned the goal he openly shared with director Josie Rourke, which was allegedly to offer a fresh take on the much-rumoured feud between Mary and Elizabeth, an approach capable of "turning [previous] stereotypes on their head" and to show that both women were ultimately the victims of the "political tectonics plates of the time" which "forced them to become antagonists". By and large, Willimon's script adheres to this explicit agenda, in a focused selection of "representative anecdotes"—very loosely based on Guy's biography—that uphold his (and Rourke's) re-visitation of Elizabethan history. Mary's formative period in France, her fourteen long years of imprisonment at Sheffield Castle, and the political scheming that complicates Mary's idealised portrayal are all sorely missing from the screenplay. The stage-ready scene of Mary's execution at Fotheringhay sets the tone for the rest of the screenplay: we are meant to take up Willimon's careful deployment of a first-person plural point of view, which follows Mary closely: "we see her from BEHIND – her back to us. And this is where we shall stay for now. Seeing events as she does, following from just a few feet to the rear" (Willimon 2017: 1). This close POV is calculated to enhance the representation of Mary's death as a gratuitous act of male-driven oppression while also promoting our own ambiguous identification—as behind-the-back spectators—with her as a martyr:

> Still behind her, from over her shoulder, we can see the crowd staring up, a hundred solemn faces – the KNIGHTS and GENTLEMEN OF NORTHAMPTONSHIRE. There is a low murmuring as a number of men speak in hushed tones to each other. It's worth noting that this crowd is ALL MEN. (Willimon 2017: 3)

We are only really made to see Mary's face at the end of the sequence, just before a flashback to 27 years before — the beach on the Scottish coast — cuts the scene short and takes us to what seems like the narrative onset of the film. The execution functions as a stark, yet prepossessing lead into the film, via a formal layout that works as a structural mould for the rest of Willimon's script. Its first representational strategy is the use of calibrated camera-angles

that tend to micro-manage scenes to an extent arguably beyond conventional camera cuts. Apart from the usual "CUT TO", "ON" or "CLOSE", the screenplay resorts to the whole gamut of camera directions: "POP TO", "TIGHT ON", " TRACK UP TO", "SHIFT FOCUS TO", "RACK FOCUS FROM": the result is a very sharp script, which possibly encroaches upon the editing process. A major representational tactic also to do with POV and focus is the use of intercutting, whether or not explicitly marked as such: in the screenplay it often serves the crucial purpose of interweaving Mary's and Elizabeth's lives at crucial junctures in the drama, in line with the Willimon's and Rourke's shared goal to "explore the dynamic between the two women." And of course, one such juncture is right here at the beginning: as we trace – from close behind – Mary's approach to her executioner, the screenplay intercuts to a courtyard at Hampton Court, where we observe Elizabeth's sobbing – once again from behind. William Cecil, her advisor, is made to summon her with a phrase before the focus shifts and we see him: "We shift focus to WILLIAM CECIL […] – a persuasive, manipulative man who understands the realpolitik of power and wields it well. From behind him, we see Elizabeth quickly dry her tears" (Willimon 2017: 2).

Intercutting picks up again in the same scene, as we alternate between Fotheringhay and Hampton Court, and reoccurs at regular intervals, for instance where Mary's intimate exchange with her maids over her sex life at Holyrood is intercut with a scene of Elizabeth and Dudley in bed in the Queen's Chamber at Hampton Court (Willimon 2017: 27); when Mary and Elizabeth exchange letters and portraits (p. 30); when Mary's giving birth is paralleled and contrasted with Elizabeth's abortive attempt at the recreational act of quilling (p. 88) and intercut with her wistful admiration of a new-born foal (p. 68); when the two queens meet and speak but temporarily do not see each other in the Forest Cottage scene (pp. 107ff) and at the very end, as Elizabeth signs the warrant to Mary's execution and the script intercuts footage reprised from the beginning with the addition of Elizabeth's voiceover (p. 116). For one, the contrastive tableaux that intercutting sets up in these and other instances very effectively dramatise the "heart versus state" motif brought out by Guy's "My heart is my own" biography and endorsed by both the screenwriter and the director: political

wrangle and the calculus of power in the Privy Council Chamber at Hampton or Council Chamber at Holyrood clash with the carefree playfulness and eroticised intimacy of the respective Queens' Chambers. Nonetheless, the screenplay repeatedly stresses that the separation between the two is tenuous and that public and private tactics of power cut across the spheres of gender and politics, of sex and of desire. So, for instance, the representation of a rather prolonged exchange between Elizabeth and Cecil on the rooftop at Hampton jostles with husband/wife role expectations in relation to politics and the succession: Elizabeth "choos[ing] to be a man" and casting Cecil as "the closest thing [she] shall ever have to a wife" (pp. 53-6). What the screenplay wistfully glosses as "a tender, intimate moment" of mutual admissions between the Queen and her Councillor, dialogue in fact turns into an all-encompassing, despondent reflection on the "foolishness" of sentiment, the "insatiable cupidity of men" and the impatient brutality of the world (p. 55), to be faced with the Machiavellian "wisdom" of men over and above the God-appointed service of wife and mothers. A similar jostling of sexual (and political) roles occurs in the staging of the furtive sexual encounter between Lord Darnley and Queen Mary, the notorious cunnilingus scene that scripts Mary's female desire in feral terms as "increasingly confident and instinctual" hunger (p. 46). Later, after her ill-fated wedding to Darnley, Mary's arousal of her husband's lustful violence (p. 64) will represent a deliberate womanly inversion of the active/passive scheme of rape, meant at the same time to establish her personal and dynastic claim over Elizabeth—as ruler and as woman— to fast-track succession; and to secure her moral high ground over and against the oppressive patriarchy that ensnares her. The latter issue is highlighted by Willimon's careful placement of prayer immediately after the rape—with Mary urging her maids to "pray for [her]"—a private devotion set against the public ritualism of the Chapel, which the screenplay summons once again via the rapid temporal shift made possible by scene timecutting (p. 64). Willimon's repeated use of timecutting certainly adds to the swift cinematic pace audiences have been trained to expect of recent productions and addresses at least in part the need to compress events while maintaining saliency. Perhaps most importantly, time-cutting and intercutting in general function as intermedial cues that affect storytelling at a much deeper

level: instead of a thoroughly drawn biographical narrative, we are offered glimpses, sketches, anecdotal traces. We are invited to approach Mary's life, so to say, interstitially, in between the cracks of those long-held historical accounts of her life that an intermedial focus brings into unprecedented relief. One final but no less crucial purpose of intercutting is to convey scenically the epistolary exchange between Mary and Elizabeth, a historical detail on which both Guy's revised biography and Willimon's script openly rely, and a feature that leads us to consider anecdotal representation in *MQS* along the issue of 'identity politics'.

3. Inclusions/Exclusions

Burke may have been among the first cultural theorists to suggest the now widely held sociological view that representation, as an act of rhetorical persuasion, builds and promotes cohesive identification around social groups. Representation (or self-representation) is thus the major rhetorical resource of identity politics, very much the centre of the current political and sociological debate. As we have already surmised in our brief analysis of the screenplay, strategies of group identification in the form of representational anecdotes are powerfully at work in the screenplay and the motion picture of *MQS*. To start with, an attenuation of topology, or the minimalist characterisation of exterior and interior locales in *MQS*, combines with an effect of *ephemerality,* induced by close intercutting between shots to produce what current intermedial theorists would define as g/local spaces: spaces, or perhaps more appropriately interstitial niches, that are at once global and local. Thus, Scottish and English toponymy is duly acknowledged in the script, but localities only very generically drawn. In the economy of the screenplay, locales function less as scenic backdrops (real, imagined or even purely symbolical) than as neutral trans-historical #platforms for the voicing of identitarian issues. These are most prominently tied to gender politics (namely the women-queen dynamic; the sexual fluidity of Darnley and the effeminate performative theatrics of Rizzio) but, in modes that highlight the feminist activists' equation of the personal and the political, they touch upon ethnicity and national identity (a feature the director seemingly chose to underline by a deliberate, at times lumbering, use of racially-conscious casting). As a result, even

such a mythologically-charged locus as Arthur's Seat (Willimon 2017: 50), which grand narratives of British national identity would shroud in the legend of Camelot, is here denied representational depth or problematisation to be cast as the soap-opera backdrop for Darnley's marriage proposal to Mary.

It will come as no surprise that backdrops of g/local topology in the screenplay of *MQS* should be matched with equally diaphanous examples of characterisation. One may apply Celestino Deleyto's analysis of identity rhetoric in film and, thinking of the prominence Willimon's script grants to the exchange of letters between Mary and Elizabeth, conclude that letters in this case "articulate an identity that is fixed and definitive, no longer in flux" (2007: 43). Alternatively, it may be argued, to continue in Deleyto's footsteps, that the many instances of voiceover in *MQS* build up "identity through paraphrase" (p. 47). However, a close reading of representational rhetoric in the screenplay suggests otherwise. The film replicates the screenplay's use of voiceover to convey the written exchange between the two queens, perhaps to suggest that, despite a piece-meal and disorientingly fast-paced presentation of their characters, there does remain an enduring written account that attests to the characters' historical identities. But the presumed identity Willimon's screenplay solemnly entrusts to the written words is continually at odds with the erratic scenic collocations he gives its characters. The one reviewer of the film who snarkily quipped that *MQS* comes across as a "consistently compelling but relentlessly inconsistent epic, a kind of self-destroying drama where characters are completely different from scene to scene" (Mancini 2018) may have had a good point. As probably did other cautious appraisers of the film's merits, who commented on Willimon's "smart streak, [...] sometimes undone by hammier impulses" or on Josie Rourke's ill-fated penchant for "translating history into modern terms"[7].

[7] The first comment comes from Lawson (2018). The second from Reed (2018). The most damning review comes from Sims (2018), for whom "Mary Queen of Scots is a Tudor drama for the modern viewer, boiling down the arcane details of centuries-old diplomacy to a personal beef between two massive celebrities", "a tawdry soap opera that insists it's an intelligent political thriller" and "little more than a vibrant-looking tableau, a two-dimensional take on an intricate piece of history".

The last comments capture what I believe are two severe flaws in the rhetorical fabric of both screenplay and film. Willimon's prolonged familiarity[8] with the intermedial modes of television screenwriting makes for a particularly flimsy screenplay, halfway between what has been called an "arch", "vibrant-looking tableau" and a mawkish primetime TV series: a story that strives for political seriousness but shuns unpleasantries (most notably the execution scene) and spares no punchlines[9]. We are left with muddled themes and dubious character snapshots, which Rourke's socially alert direction brings to a carefully polished, but ultimately rather shallow stage. It is a representational stage taken up less by the knotty lives of local individuals in history than by the pressing concerns of an overarching, inclusive agenda, of which they must be made the global mouthpieces. Rourke's openly feminist take on history alongside Willimon's script does resonate with the "woke" rhetoric of our times: with the *#MeToo* and Hollywood *#TimesUp* movements. The motif of misogynistic assault orchestrated by selfish men fully engages both screenwriter and director, a fact acknowledged by supporters and detractors alike. Towards the end, in a quick exchange with Dudley, Elizabeth is made to utter "How cruel men are" (p. 98), in fact a rather grandstanding and bathetic reminder of what the screenplay has been harping on all along: collectively, in the all-male audience of the execution scene and in the long gallery scene at Hampton Court, a burrow of self-serving men; and individually, in the ceaseless treachery, manipulation or abuse of most male characters towards the two royal victims. But Willimon's plan is even more ambitious, for inclusiveness is also predicated across the whole gamut of identity groups, with references to homoeroticism and the queer, as when Rizzio is encouraged to "be whoever [he] wish[es] to be" (p. 40) and applauded for "not betray[ing] [his] nature" (p. 59); or to

[8] To be sure, Willimon's previous cinematic endeavour for the screenplay of *The Ides of March* (2011) received favourable reviews. It was, however, also a collaborative writing task involving George Clooney, Grant Heslov, and Beau Williams.

[9] Debruge (2018): "Like an entire season of peak television crammed into the space of two hours, Mary Queen of Scots spares us not only the butchery but also a great deal of the drama that might explain how the misfortunate monarch came to find her neck on the line". For a gruesome account of the execution scene see https://tudorhistory.org/primary/exmary.html, last accessed on October 25, 2019.

ethnicity and religion, as in Mary's linguistically mediated exchange with Urie Campbell, who is not Catholic and speaks only Gaelic. Mary wishes to reassure him that "we go to the same heaven" (p. 61), just as she will rather condescendingly remind Elizabeth in a final voiceover: eventually they will both look down "from the same heaven above, in service of the same Lord..." (p. 30).

To an extent, of course, awareness of identity issues is a welcome change from the muted histories and the mystifications of the past. The problem is that, in *MQS*, group identity takes the spotlight at the expense of individual identities. The complex nuances of lived, local experience, or even for that matter the much-celebrated freedom of local performative acts, must make room for the intermedial reach of global-scale representations. That, I think, is a major fault of both screenplay and film in this case. For a global site cannot simplistically be also a local one. Nor can a global identity. Unless they are both deprived of characterisations for the sake of a reductive representational model that is well suited to the broad mediatic efficiency and the viral propagation, the easily tweetable *memes* of a g-local market. We all rely, of course, on multiple identitarian models and multiple representations, either real or imaginatively performed. And the freedom made possible by embracing a markedly performative representation of oneself can work as an important rhetorical tool for emancipation. However, the conflation of global and local in a supposed intermedial category of g/localism is a devious, if certainly efficacious, interpolation of the capital-driven market, to whose concerns it ultimately responds. For all its radically identitarian posing, then, g/localism seems, alas, to be merely skin-deep. I believe this is a very serious matter, which invites us to reflect on the social and cultural implications of intermediality as such, of which *MQS* is an especially poignant example. Eric Hobsbawm, to name perhaps the most influential theorist to have addressed the issue of identity politics (which biopics like *MQS* so powerfully summon), has repeatedly voiced strong reservations, if not outright admonitions, over the ambivalent effects identitarian policies have for actual social emancipation. In a keen reading of the cultural history of the late 20th century, which foresees much of our current dilemma, Hobsbawm has shown, convincingly, that identity politics can promote illusory forms of emancipated identity, in fact binding subjects to the exigencies and the priorities of a globally

neo-liberal market most of us inhabit only precariously, between its fissures. The representational paradox of collective identity politics is that, since they rely on a negative "us *vs* them" rhetoric, it actually prevents individuals "from having the multiple, combined, identities which are natural to most" (p. 1) The identitarian rhetoric discussed by Hobsbawm is even more deceptive as it is made readily available for diffusion in the form of easily digestible "intermedial" formulae (or *memes*)[10] across the current media landscape. Nor are cultural theorists like Hobsbawm (or like Richard Rorty, 1999; Todd Gitlin, 1995; and Michael Tomasky, 2017, to name a prominent few), the only ones to advise caution with collective identity politics and the rhetoric of emancipatory inclusion. Perhaps unexpectedly, a warning in this regard comes from feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, whose fame rests with the notion, now amply discussed by sociologists, of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991). While acknowledging the useful cohesive effect of identity politics, which allows people to come together in communities based on a shared sense of identity, Crenshaw has misgivings about the easy conflation of differences collective identity politics promotes, something she sets out to redress by using an "intersectional" model that pays heed to how different aspects of an individual's identity (race, gender, sexual orientation, and others) "intersect".

4. Execution

To claim that, in the screenplay of *MQS,* the problem has much to do with execution is no mere flippancy. The ritualised execution of a victim, especially when surrounded by the halo of martyrdom, touches upon the social practice of scapegoating, whose symbolic theatricality Burke discussed at length before René Girard

[10] The legitimacy of "meme" as an interpretive cultural category remains questionable, the term being linked to what comes across at times as a rather fundamentalist assertion of cultural Darwinism. See for instance Shifman (2013); Bebić and Volarevic (2018). In this paper, I use the word "meme" loosely, as a metaphor for any cultural artefact (including biopics) that lends itself to replication via "viral" diffusion among people within a culture and across media. In this sense, I would argue that intermedial forms have a marked "memetic" potential on account of their provisionality and their stylistic versatility, which are also, I would insist, a function of market-driven efficiency.

(1986). Victimage, as Burke calls it, is itself a form of symbolic representation, a dramatised act of catharsis meant to keep evil or collective guilt at bay by transferring them onto a sacrificial victim. As a rite, then, victimage may be either stylistically effective and cathartic or a failure, depending on the cultural expectations and sensibilities of the community that performs it. That also applies to Mary's execution, both a grisly historical fact and a symbolic act in the line of Christian martyrdoms, the value of which Mary must have known well, given the bitter contention over legitimate martyrs between Catholics and Protestants in late 16th century England. All these issues are thoroughly addressed in Guy's biography but survive only half-heartedly in the intermedial space of Willimon's reduction. Yet, "the rhetoric of death", as Charles Carlton calls the performative verbal and visual features of early modern scaffolds (1983), makes us pause to reflect on the tangle of motives and aims that Mary's execution involved. Was it mere show? A theatrical performance with Mary deliberately casting herself as a Catholic martyr despite what had been possibly a lukewarm faith and certainly an unconventional lifestyle? In his account of events, Guy seems to imply as much, in a meticulous description of Mary's execution outfit which stresses the idea that it was a premeditated theatrical performance. Willimon's screenplay followed suit. The initial flash-forward to the hours before the execution relies on a choreography of glamorised fatality: dripping candles and a painstaking description of Mary's accoutrements: gown, hair, and "carefully chosen" religious regalia, an ivory crucifix, a Latin prayer book, a rosary, a medallion:

> Mary stands, as do her Servants. She's wearing a long, black satin gown. A white cap and laced veil against which her dark, auburn hair is lustrous. It's her hair that we're drawn to – since we've yet to see her face.
>
> She goes to a side table and retrieves two carefully chosen items, an ivory crucifix in one hand, a Latin prayer book in the other. Meanwhile one of the Maidservants loops a string of rosary beads with a golden cross to a girdle at her waist. Another fastens a gold chain around her neck, from which hangs a medallion bearing the image of Christ as the Lamb of God. (Willimon 2017: 1-2)

The screenplay continues in similar gradations until the "collective gasp" of the all-male audience that encircles her:

We are still behind Mary. She stands. Two Earls remove her outer garment – the black satin – revealing a crimson garment beneath. The colour of martyrdom. A collective gasp. We CUT TO Noblemen in the midst of the crowd, gazing at her with disgust. One whispers to the other—MILDMAY She thinks herself a martyr. KNIGHTLEY

Wretched woman. (p. 3)

Following closely behind Mary's shoulders, we are perhaps expected to wince at the noblemen's chauvinistic comments. But the entrancing ambivalence of this scaffold scene has us "all staring up at Mary in morbid fascination and anxiousness" just like them. In stylistic accordance with the demands of prime-time drama, the screenplay (and the film) turn the brutality of Mary's execution into an idealized show[11]: not a scaffold but a stage (the word Willimon uses) or rather a platform for the glorified uttering of vaguely neoliberal and vaguely nationalistic platitudes, which the interpolation of Mary's ghostly voiceover authoritatively upholds. The scene must be quoted in full:

Bull gestures to a cushion before her in front of the block. Mary kneels and begins to pray, head bowed, eyes closed—

MARY (CONT'D)
Salve, Regina, Mater misericordiæ, vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve.
Ad te clamamus exsules filii Hevæ, In te Domino confido...

Her Latin prayer fades as it is replaced my Mary's V.O.

MARY (V.O.)
I shall be watching you from heaven...

Mary's eyes open as Bull places his hand on Mary's shoulder. We hear the steady drone of a single bag pipe.

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[11] As historical drama, *MQS* may be said to perpetuate the sort of mainstream historical dramatisation popularised a while ago in Shekhar Kapur's period piece *Elizabeth* (1998) and its sequel, *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007). While possibly similar to these cinematic products in a number of "textural" respects (i.e. atmospheric settings, lavish costumes, sensationalist), I believe *MQS* is more readily inscribed in a televisual/streaming style that relies, among other things, on unobtrusive characterisation and weak localisation (what I discuss in this paper as "attenuated topology"). I find Kapur's Elizabeth is all but unobtrusive: she emerges as a sharply delineated, nationally coded cultural emblem (the ultimate paragon of British ingenuity and nearly jingoistic exceptionalism).

INT. HAMPTON COURT – RECEIVING CHAMBER – DAY
James, in full regal attire, sitting on Elizabeth's throne, crown atop his head, scepter in hand, staring straight into
the camera—

MARY (V.O.)
As your crown, one day, unites two Kingdoms.
A flourish of notes from the bag pipe.

INT. FOTHERINGHAY CASTLE – GREAT HALL
Bull gently guides her head to the chopping block.

We are TIGHT on her face as we see the frescoed ceiling beyond it. She is trying to keep calm but she is breathing fast now, pulse racing in her final few moments. The axe will fall any second. To us, in a whisper as the pipes play—

MARY
And we shall have peace.

A deep intake of air, the pipes growing even louder. A slow exhale. The briefest flash of calm.
BLACKOUT. SILENCE. (Willimon 2017: 17-18)

Thus Willimon's "briefest flash of calm" makes peace with the gruesome details that John Guy's biography at least retains. The intermedial space of the screenplay seems to have no room for the contextual thicket of history, or, for that matter, for the lingering gaze, the pauses or the silences of a theatrical piece, even one utterly immersed in melodrama. Intermediality must compress history into a "briefest flash", into more or less fetching aphorisms and memorable camera shots. In a sense, the paradox of *MQS* is that despite its virtuous agenda, its final effect differs little from the brief reel circulated in the US by the Edison Manufacturing Company in 1898 to showcase the "special effects" that the novel medium of cinema could yield: a black and white sequence of Mary's execution that cleverly portrays the severing of her head[12]. No rolling heads feature, of course, in *MQS*, even though the British Board for Film

[12] *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots,* Dir. Alfred Clark. Edison Manufacturing Company, USA, 1895. "A Realistic reproduction of an historic scene" Maguire & Baucus catalogue: Library Of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/00694120, Last access: October 25, 2019.

Classification gave the film a 15-rating for "strong violence, sex, sexual violence". The execution is there, but by an intermedial sleight of hand it is deprived of any offensive realism to become the luminous, g/local stage of female self-affirmation against a vicious male world. We are not faced here simply with historical inaccuracies, even though both critics and general spectators have been quite vocal over the many liberties taken in the screenplay and film. We have grown used, after all, to accepting fiction, or any symbolic account, as an unavoidable distortion of raw history, of what anthropologists have called the "context of situation", the "largely non-verbal cluster of circumstances out of which any strictly verbal context arises" (Burke and Rueckert 2003: 105). In the case of *MQS*, what jars is the fact that the symbolic distortion itself fails to "ring true", as the urge to dwell on neoliberal truths[13] trumps the aesthetic and cognitive expectations of verisimilitude. Screenplay and film here are unrealistic, not because they interpose themes, motifs or anxieties that did not probably figure in those terms across the cultural landscape of early modern England (although that may be a legitimate test for self-styled historical drama) but in the sense that they fall short of the stylistic consistency expected of dramatic realism[14]. It is my contention that the intermedial trajectory of Mary's story (from documentary account to biographical non-fiction; to screenplay/storyboard; to motion picture) coincides with a progressive deterioration in narrative style, a breakdown of narrative units and a reduction of scope that are meant to produce a locally styled but globally appealing audio-visual artefact; a product whose very rebellious attitudinising plays into the hands of the

[13] A thought-provoking discussion of the problematic ties between neoliberalism and gender politics is given by Catherine Rottenberg (2018). She uses the phrase "neoliberal feminism" to describe a relatively new strain of feminism which "dovetails, almost seamlessly, with neoliberal capitalism" and is "unabashedly exclusionary [...], encompassing only so-called aspirational women in its address." I would argue that, for all its professed rejection of heteronormativity and white privilege, MQS bears strong *stylistic* affinities with this trend.

[14] The critical issue of "dramatic realism" versus "historical realism" within Burke's all-embracing theory of dramatism would call for an extensive discussion that is well beyond the confines of this paper. Suffice it to say that, in characteristically paradoxical terms, Burke's work repeatedly distinguishes and conflates these variants of "realism" on stylistic grounds.

market. By way of conclusion, we could state that intermediality relies on reductions that yield compressed representations of life. This radical abridgement of history is well suited to the strategic demands for broad and immediate propagation across a digitised and globalised media market. Its end results are sumptuous narrative bites, sleek representative anecdotes deliberately polished to convey a reassuring impression of locality and historical authenticity which masks, rather deviously, a global, presentist reach. Netflix productions such as *The Last Kingdom* (2015), *The Crown* (2016), *The King* (2019) are good, but far from unique instances of this trend[15]. Is this yet another rephrasing of the hackneyed "book is better than the film" argument, then? My point is another: we need to delve more deeply, to pay closer and sustained attention to the stylistic biases, the symbolic weightings that intermediality, now more than ever driven by the pervasive moulds of technological innovation, will be carrying—inevitably—within itself.

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[15] Among others, ITV's *Downton Abbey* (2010) and *Victoria* (2016); Starz' *The White Princess* (2017); Sky Television's *Britannia* (2017) would also lend themselves to an analysis along these lines. As of course would CBS's romanticised biography of Mary Stuart in *Reign* (2013).

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